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ABSTRACT

Although serving on a school board is frequently a thankless and difficult task, good board members must be recruited, since the elected school board is a cornerstone of our representative form of government and is a central element of local control. A recent increase in board member turnover is assignable to the large amount of time it takes to adequately perform board functions and to the frustrations with outside forces impinging on board members. Board members have experienced increased harassment in the form of union and taxpayer activism. The author suggests six ways to identify potential board candidates, including working with citizen committees and parents groups to find interested people. He advocates the use of local, state, and national orientation programs, as well as continuous inservice training, for board members. (Author/DS)

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PRESENTER: Nick Goble, director of Public Relations, Pennsylvania School Boards Association
TOPIC: "Getting Good Board Members and Holding Them"
TIME: Saturday, Feb. 26, 8:00 a.m.
PLACE: Room 23, Convention Center
PROGRAM: Page 44

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Our workshop topic for this national meeting is certainly appropriate. "Getting Good Board Members and Holding Them" is the very corner stone of how public education functions in our representative form of government.

Serving on a school board these days is a thankless and difficult task. The job is unpaid (a few states provide some token stipend), entails both a great deal of frustration and many hours of a board member's personal time to fulfill this public service.

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Board members and administrators are caught between the escalating demands of teacher's organizations for pay increase and more fringe benefits on the one hand. On the other, they are under pressure from their constituents to hold down taxes. At the same time, they must comply with increasing laws and directives concerning such things as bussing, food service, building codes, federal guidelines, court orders and a host of other mandates.

It is little wonder that nationally we have experienced an increased turnover of school board members. I'm sure that those administrators in the audience would agree that consistent turnover does not provide the knowledgeable and stable base on the board to achieve educational goals and objectives.

Before we can examine some possible solutions to our workshop topic today, let's look at why incumbents refuse to run and why they are defeated in their bids for reelection.

TIME---The most recent survey by our Association shows that over half of our 4,500 school directors spend 20 hours or more a month on all types of school board duties. That's the equivalent of half of a normal work week.

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As an example, a board president in one of our average size cities kept a close record of his school board duties in 1975.

He attended 231 meetings, answered 900 phone calls and gave more than 643 hours of his time to school affairs. That latter figure is equal to one extra work week a month.

FRUSTRATION---School directors are frustrated with outside forces that impinge on their policy-making role. I cite the report of a blue ribbon commission formed by our Association in 1975 to study local lay control of the public schools. This report, which has received national attention, focused on seven factors that have tended to erode local lay control of education in our state. Similar studies have been conducted in other states.

The report, and accompanying recommendations to reverse this trend, identified these seven factors as:

- Some ineffective school boards. Some boards, and their administration, have not demonstrated the initiative or leadership to challenge special interest groups who wish to reduce the policy-making authority of boards.

- Problems resulting from consolidation. Large scale consolidation of school districts in the past 10 years have diminished the closeness of home-school partnership of a decade ago. This has resulted in increased communication problems between the citizenry and school management.

- Increased legislative mandates. This factor speaks for itself. An an example, our Association will typically report, review and make comment on some 500 educational related legislative proposals in one year.

- Increased centralized control by state agencies. I do not have to tell you that other groups are attempting to usurp the prerogatives of local school boards. There is a definite thrust for more centralized control at the state level.

- Employe unionization. Collective bargaining laws have abridged the authority of school boards in many cases. The largest union in Pennsylvania, larger than the U. S. Steel Workers and other private unions, is the teachers union. Their financial resources and political clout are formidable.

- Judicial decisions. Litigation has resulted in reduced policy-making authority of boards. Employe leave, control of records, employe and student rights - have been adversely affected by labor board rulings, arbitration awards and other court cases.

- Increased educational costs. All of the above items have resulted in greatly increased costs for public education. A more critical attitude by taxpayers has resulted in a steady decline of public confidence in public education.

HARASSMENT---Another factor besides increased time on school board duties and increased frustration with erosion of local control is the serious reality of personal harassment.

Union and taxpayer activism have resulted in consistent bombardment of public officials at home and work. As you know, Pennsylvania has led the nation in the number of school strikes during the past six years. It has not been an uncommon practice for employe groups to picket board members at their residence and place of work. Threatening phone calls, tire slashing, intimidation have been commonplace - not just isolated incidents.

Further, employe groups have actively campaigned, with manpower and financial resources, to unseat board members and elect their own members to the board. Our membership data show the largest occupational classification to be professional educators (teachers, public and private, and other school employes, college or university instructors, etc.). The next three groups in order were corporate executives/managers (11%), engineering/technical (10%) and housewife (10%). Of this latter group, many were former teachers or held educational related positions.

Though I have spent considerable time on the problem, I think this is very important if we are to look at possible solutions and suggestions to our topic.

Further, my suggestions will not seem important, or even appropriate, unless you and my colleagues on this panel can come to this fundamental agreement: Our system of local, lay-controlled, free public education is worthy of support and should be preserved and promoted.

IDENTIFYING AND RECRUITING CITIZENS TO THE BOARD. This is a tough area, especially for administrators. Some would say it is political suicide for superintendents to promote and encourage people to run for school board member. I would agree. But there are some

ways to identify potential school board candidates.

- Citizen committees. Such committees, and other board appointed commissions, can be fertile groups for identifying potential candidates for the board. Such groups, who serve on behalf of the board in planning and evaluation, receive a first-hand education of the operation of the board and the school district's successes and problems.

- Working with other local public officials. As a standard practice school administration and the school board should be regularly communicating and periodically meeting with borough, township and other municipal officials. This is necessary from a practical standpoint in future planning and the day-to-day operation of the schools. This dialogue is important where school board members are appointed or confirmed by other governmental units, such as mayor or city council. But his liaison activity can produce other highly qualified candidates for the school board.

- Parent groups. Our data shows that most of our current school directors have children in the public schools. Generally people come forward to school board service when their youngsters are in school. Improved communications from the school district to these groups is another method of possibly identifying potential school board candidates.

- Pressure groups. Let's face it. Often taxpayer groups, or other ad hoc community pressure groups surface and successfully elect their candidate. Openly communicating and working with such groups is extremely important. These people are often very sincere, but sometimes quite uniformed. Early constructive relationships with the leadership of such groups can develop into effecitve school board service later.

- Other community groups. Civic, professional and social organizations are constantly looking for program ideas. Why not a program or audio-visual presentation that looks at the role and responsibility of the local school board. Such a presentation will (1) improve the general public understanding of the local school board; (2) and could encourage qualified candidates to come forward.

- General information. The school district, through its administration, should be a ready reference bank of school board information, duties and responsibilities, operating policies, and general information. Any citizen interested in running for the school board should be able to receive a packet of information from local officials. Filing dates, election procedures, eligibility, code of ethics, etc., can be easily pulled together. State school boards associations and other state agencies have public service packets that can supplement what is developed locally.

Our Association has developed a very good filmstrip reviewing the duties and responsibilities of local school officials. This 20-minute presentation can be used locally and statewide and succinctly provides an overview of school board governance. Other states are developing such a presentation and you may want to check with your own state school boards association.

PRE-SERVICE AND IN-SERVICE TRAINING. One of the strengths of local control is that membership on school boards is diversified - that is people have varying backgrounds. But board members are laymen. Practically all of them attended or participated in the public schools. They usually come to their new duties with some fixed idea of what the public schools did to them or for them. Generally they have no notion of effective boardmanship. Therefore, wide range of local, state and national orientation programs and continuous in-service training are imperative if you are going to attract and keep good, well informed board members.

Our Association regularly provides some 30 regional inservice programs on a wide variety of subjects that will complement those activities at the local level. In the interim between when boards are elected and when they are officially seated we run a series of regional workshops for new board members.

Some of the important concepts we attempt to translate to these people in our pre-service training are:

- School board members are state officials. Though elected locally, they serve on behalf of the state legislature.
- School boards are a unit of local government, the only such unit spelled out in our state constitution.
- School boards are a legislative body, empowered to set policy within the framework of the state legislature.
- School directors represent all the people within the community, not a particular segment.
- Board members must study all matters presented to them in view of the needs of the community, not just a particular segment.

- Board members must become thoroughly familiar with the policies and function of the board.

- Boards are not administrative bodies. Neither should they be "rubber stamps" for professional educators. The fine line between policy and administrative implementation requires "asking the good question" and being fully informed.

- Boards should recognize that they represent the public interest. When someone asks, "who represents the kids?", tell them you do. No one else is legally charged to do that.

- Boards should hire superintendents and administrators who thoroughly understand that their role is "to carry out public policy". Selecting competent administrators who recognize these responsibilities is one of the boards most important functions.

- Evaluation of the administration and district employes should be accomplished on a regular and systematic approach through existing policies.

- School boards have three main responsibilities: (1) planning, (2) making policy or passing legislation and (3) evaluation.

CONTINUED ORIENTATION. Effective boardmanship is a continuous, ongoing, learning experience. Orientation is just the beginning of that process. Before offering any suggestions for improved orientation there are four points I would like to make.

(1) Our research clearly indicates that it takes at least two years of school board service before board members gain the background and confidence to perform effectively and confidently. Consequently, the pre-service time period and the first few years of board service are most important in developing board leadership.

(2) Many school officials lament that inservice training at the local level is probably the weakest. Therefore, state level resources should complement, and support local district activities and educational programs.

(3) Local boards should set aside adequate funds in the budget to support local, state and national training programs for board members. School districts are usually one of the largest employers in the community. Board members setting policy for these multi-million dollar enterprises must be informed. They cannot make wise decisions in a vacuum.

(4) Successful orientation and school board training programs need the same careful attention, planning and commitment as other school district concerns.

My notion is that one of the keys to retaining dedicated board members is to keep them informed and provide them with the necessary tools to do an effective job. Without these ingredients, dedication will melt into frustration and ultimately resignation.

These 20 suggestions can either be implemented at the local effort or at the state school board association level - or both.

- Provide board members with policy manuals, budget information, related state laws, operational and financial data.
- Keep the board up-to-date on current long range plans.
- Provide a wide variety of information on a regular basis to all board members. (Weekly packets on curriculum reports, agendas, trends, etc.)
- Provide basic handbooks and guidebooks on such topics as school law, collective bargaining, board duties and responsibilities, and school finance.
- Provide changes in state law, federal law, regulations, etc.
- Provide updates and information on proposed state and federal legislation. (Such items should be placed on board agenda, discussed and board positions should be communicated to lawmakers.)
- Provide board members with significant court rulings, labor board rulings and arbitration awards.
- Ensure that board members gain adequate background in negotiations and employe relations.
- Spend time in how budgets are developed and aid board members in becoming familiar with state accounting procedures.
- Provide board members with the opportunity to regularly visit and observe schools, programs, personnel and students. (Board members shouldn't feel like they're outsiders. Neither should board members take off on their own individual "witch hunt".)
- Boards should regularly review and evaluate their performance. Not fault-finding or finger pointing, but"where are we doing well and where can we improve."
- Boards should hold yearly workshops with administrative staff, reviewing goals and objectives and planning.
- Boards should regularly be involved in state and national meetings.
- Boards should monitor state agencies such as the Department of Education, state board of education, professional standards and practices commission,etc.
- Boards should budget an appropriate amount of money for adequate inservice training at the local,state and national level.
- Boards should communicate with legislators and take an active role in state government through their elected representatives and their state school boards association. Area legislators should be invited to local board meetings on a regular basis.

- Board members should be invited, and be willing, to participate in local school programs, activities and other civic affairs.
- School boards should become very familiar with the schools curricula, staff deployment and other related school statistics.
- Board members need to be furnished information on class size, open education, teaching innovations and other educational trends.
- Board members need to be informed rapidly during crisis and emergency situations.

In summary, I have reviewed our topic today from three points: (1) the problems associated to why board members are defeated or why they refuse to seek another term in office; (2) a few methods of seeking and recruiting qualified board members; and (3) some of the basics required to better inform veteran and new board members.

Though we have identified many problems, I submit to you that the American style of educational governance is unique. Local control of American education has kept our schools responsive to the will of the people and close to the people.

I'm amazed as each election passes that we continually find good people surfacing to new roles of community leadership, giving unselfishly of their time and energies. Our job then becomes clear: provide them with the best, most accurate information available; give them the best advice, alternatives and recommendations possible. I have enough faith in the system that they will make the right decision.